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## Dougherty & McBrayer, eds., SKEPTICAL THEISM: NEW ESSAYS

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, ed. Trent Dougherty and Justin P. McBrayer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 322 pages. \$30 (paperback).

JEFF SNAPPER, University of Notre Dame

This volume provides a comprehensive entry point for professional philosophers into the current state of evidential arguments like the following (a *God-justifying good* for an evil is a good that would morally justify God in permitting it if God were to exist):

*Evidential Argument*

- E<sub>1</sub> There are many evils for which we can find no God-justifying goods. (Evil premise)
- E<sub>2</sub> If there are many evils for which we can find no God-justifying goods then it is reasonable to believe that at least one evil has no God-justifying good. (Noseeum premise)
- E<sub>3</sub> It is reasonable to believe that if at least one evil has no God-justifying good, then there is no God. (All-good premise)
- E<sub>4</sub> If it is reasonable to believe *p* and it is reasonable to believe *if p then q*, then it is reasonable to believe *q*. (Reasonable belief closure premise)

Therefore,

It is reasonable to believe that there is no God.

This argument is stated in terms of reasonable belief. Similar arguments can be stated in terms of justified belief, probability, and credences or degrees of belief. Although William Rowe was the first to explicitly formulate an evidential argument ("The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 [1979]: 335–341), there are now a variety of evidential arguments. Likewise, Stephen Wykstra was the first to systematically state a skeptical theistic reply ("The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance,'" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 [1984]: 73–93), but there are now a variety of skeptical theisms. A central theme



of skeptical theisms is that humans should not expect to be able to identify God-justifying goods for most of the evils we know of because of the epistemic distance between us and God. If so, then it is reasonable for skeptical theists to reject the Noseeum premise.

The current volume shows that evidential arguments and skeptical theist replies raise more questions than they answer, ranging from commitment to global skepticism and moral paralysis to conflict with commonsense and Christian virtue. The book is divided into four sections that address knowledge and epistemic humility, conditions of reasonable epistemic access, skeptical theism's implications for theism, and skeptical theism's implications for morality. The book is very nicely balanced with a variety of atheists, agnostics, and theists engaged in charitable and constructive debate. However, with twenty-two authors providing a variety of fine-grained arguments I here comment only on knowledge, epistemic humility, and conditions of reasonable epistemic access.

### *Knowledge and Epistemic Humility*

Jonathan Matheson begins the section by arguing that strong skeptical theism implies that skeptical theists have no justification for believing the Noseeum premise simply because skeptical theism is true, and so they are not justified in believing that some evils have no God-justifying goods on the basis of Noseeum. However, phenomenal conservatism, the thesis that "if it seems to S as if  $p$  then S thereby has at least *prima facie* justification for believing  $p$ ," provides independent justification for even a skeptical theist's belief in such evils. If it seems to Sam the skeptical theist as if some evil lacks a God-justifying good, then Sam thereby has *some* justification for believing it. So, Matheson reasons, phenomenal conservatism is incompatible with strong skeptical theism. But phenomenal conservatism is compatible with weak skeptical theism, the thesis that being on balance justified in believing skeptical theism fully defeats any justification she has for believing Noseeum. Matheson recommends weak, rather than strong, skeptical theism to phenomenal conservatives. One reply Matheson does not consider is that a strong skeptical theist could consistently endorse phenomenal conservatism and deny that it ever seems to any skeptical theist as if some evil lacks a God-justifying good. Perhaps, as Wykstra argues ("The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering"), it seems to a theist as if an evil  $E$  is a gratuitous evil only if, if  $E$  were not gratuitous, it would not seem gratuitous; but, per skeptical theism, it would seem gratuitous even if it weren't, and so no theist is entitled to the "it seems as if" claim.

Trent Dougherty agrees with Matheson that weak skeptical theism is compatible with phenomenal conservatism, but thinks the defeat can also go in the other direction. While Sam's justification for his skeptical theism may defeat his direct justification for belief in *gratuitous evil* (evil that has no God-justifying good), his direct justification for belief in gratuitous evil might instead defeat his justification for skeptical theism. It just depends

upon which of Sam's seemings (that skeptical theism is true vs. that some evil is gratuitous) are stronger for Sam. I agree with Dougherty. Anyone who has considered two sets of incompatible theses that enjoy roughly equal evidential support knows what it is like to repeatedly switch views on a topic. Perhaps some skeptical theists occasionally find themselves believing that some evils really do not have any justifying goods, and perhaps they are justified in doing so for at least a time. (There is a difficulty though. Suppose Sam, reading some tragic news article, suddenly realizes he was, for a moment there, believing in gratuitous evils. As a serious skeptical theist, Sam will quickly "turn that car around," and admonish himself for so hastily believing in gratuitous evils since his skeptical theism rules them out. The difficulty is that the natural knee-jerk reaction to certain reports of evil is belief in gratuitous evil, but the skeptical theist knows this and thinks he has found an adequate reply. So rather than interpret his occasional dabble in gratuitous evil as a genuine case of direct justification defeating his justification for skeptical theism, the skeptical theist is more likely to interpret his doxastic slippage as a fleeting failure of rationality.)

John DePoe defends *positive skeptical theism*—skeptical theism plus the thesis that "if there is a God, we should *expect* the world to contain some seemingly gratuitous evils" (40), because the existence of apparently gratuitous evils produces certain goods that God would desire. The two kinds of goods produced are (i) an epistemic distance between God and humans that we need in order to have genuine faith in God, and (ii) a provocation for "some of the greatest human acts of love and compassion" (39). A person who considers what appears to be an evil for which there is no moral justification—but for which there must be a justification given the existence of God—acutely senses the epistemic distance between herself and God, and thereby is made better able to have genuine faith in this being whose epistemic powers she now better appreciates. Likewise, a person confronted by apparently gratuitous evil feels sharp compassion for those afflicted by the evil, in a way that produces more genuine and sacrificial aid than would be produced were the evil apparently deserved or just. While I like DePoe's line of reasoning, one might object that the evil produced by apparently gratuitous evil (even if not actually gratuitous) morally outweighs these goods (e.g., war and rape are worse than the good of epistemic distance and selfless compassion) such that, on balance, we would *not* expect apparently gratuitous evil if God exists.

Chris Tucker shows that Noseeum gets part of its intuitive pull from a conflation of exact representation with approximate representation. A sample of dogs is exactly representative of all dogs with respect to *being brown* just in case, if  $n\%$  of the dogs in that sample are brown, then *exactly*  $n\%$  of all dogs are brown. A sample of cats is approximately representative of all cats with respect to *being black* just in case, if  $n\%$  of the cats in that sample are black, then  $n\% \pm 3\%$  of all cats are black. These distinct representation relations yield non-equivalent versions of Noseeum:

*Approximate Noseeum*

If there are many evils for which humans can find no God-justifying goods then (because the sample of evils humans have inspected is *approximately* representative of all evils with respect to having a God-justifying good) probably at least one of them,  $\pm 3\%$ , has no God-justifying good.

*Exact Noseeum*

If there are many evils for which humans can find no God-justifying goods then (because the sample of evils humans have inspected is *exactly* representative of all evils with respect to having a God-justifying good) probably at least one of them has no God-justifying good.

Approximate Noseeum is pretty plausible. But the evidential argument is valid only if Noseeum is understood as Exact Noseeum. And because skeptical theists have “undefeated reason to withhold judgment whether” Exact Noseeum is true, they have an adequate reply to the argument (48).

Todd Long defends a minimal skeptical theism from charges of moral and religious skepticism. His main defensive thesis is that skeptical theistic Christians should “maintain humility about many matters moral and epistemic, a humility that engenders a modest skepticism” (74). Yet he also affirms that the skeptical theist’s moral and religious beliefs can be justified on her total evidence (72–73). So Long here distinguishes knowing vs. justifiably believing moral and religious truths. I agree that everyone should humbly grant they do not (always) know many of the moral and religious theses they justifiably believe. But I have difficulty seeing how these facts defend skeptical theism from charges of wider skepticism. Saying only that the skeptical theist “sometimes finds herself performing acts of service that she has reason to believe are good, in light of her total evidence at the relevant time; thus, she is often epistemically justified in believing that performing some action is the morally right thing to do” raises the objection without answering it. Presumably, when facing moral decisions, a salient part of her total evidence just is her justified belief in skeptical theism which, goes the objection, undercuts her justification for believing that a particular action is the morally right one.

E. J. Coffman, following Dougherty and Tucker, points out that Long’s minimal skeptical theism does not prevent a person from having non-inferential justification for belief in gratuitous evils, and so minimal skeptical theism does not “completely incapacitate” evidential arguments (76). He then argues, along *reductio* lines, that Tucker’s criticism of Michael Bergmann’s skeptical theism is internally inconsistent. Coffman’s central idea is that if a person has undefeated reason to withhold judgment on whether her *perception of* total moral (dis)value of some event E accurately reflects the *actual* total moral (dis)value of E, then that person does not have an undefeated non-inferentially justified belief that E’s total moral (dis)value is, say, negative. For example, if Tim has (undefeated) reason

to remain agnostic concerning whether what he perceives to be an overall bad thing (a fawn dying slowly in a forest fire) accurately reflects its overall badness, then Tim does not have an *undefeated* justified belief that the fawn's slow death is, overall, bad. After all, if Tim had an *undefeated* justified belief that the fawn's slow death is, overall, bad, then he would be able to unqualifiedly trust his initial perception of its overall badness—he would not have an undefeated reason for not trusting it. I agree with Coffman and echo his sentiment that Michael Bergmann's ST4—"We have no good reason for thinking that the total moral value or disvalue we perceive in certain complex states of affairs accurately reflects the total moral value or disvalue they really have" (12)—is important to the full skeptical theistic response. More generally, it seems that for skeptical theism to fully answer the evidential challenge it needs to block non-inferential justification (on the basis of seemings or whatever else) for belief in gratuitous evil, and ST4 looks like a good start.

N. N. Trakakis presents the following paradox for Christianity. Each of the following claims seems true but they cannot all be true: Christians ought to be humble (and *ought* implies *can*), Christians have privileged access to absolute truth (dogma), but, anyone with that kind of access cannot be humble. Trakakis argues against the fourth claim. According to Eastern Orthodoxy, dogma is a gracious gift from God that humbles the person to whom it is given; or as he puts it, "[A]n awareness of the gifted nature of all that we are and have, including our knowledge of God, almost spontaneously brings about in us a profound humility and gratitude" (97). I like the solution and hope it is true. But what do we say about the numerous Christians with true religious beliefs who are smug, self-satisfied, and doxastically pushy? I suspect the Orthodox answer is that though their religious beliefs are true, they do not rise to the level of knowledge precisely because they fail to realize that dogma is a gift. If so, then knowledge of God requires awareness that theological truths are gifts. But botanical and hydroelectric knowledge have no such requirement. This suggests that subject matter affects the conditions needed for knowledge, which is rather surprising if true.

#### *Debating Conditions On Reasonable Epistemic Access (CORNEA)*

Kenneth Boyce opens the second section of the book by explaining why some think that skeptical theism implies global skepticism. The salient part of that objection goes as follows. Due to failure to accurately discern total moral (dis)value, skeptical theists have good reason to withhold belief from the proposition that God is not systematically deceiving us. If so, then it is not reasonable to believe that proposition. If it is not reasonable to believe that proposition, then it is likewise not reasonable to believe that we have hands. Boyce then replies by showing how one might have good reason (from perceptual limitations) to withhold belief from *p* and at the same time reasonably believe *p* based on distinct evidence. The inaccuracy of our perceptions of total (dis)value provides a good reason

to refrain from believing that God is not deceiving us. But independent reasoning provides a distinct reason to believe it. In particular, it is reasonable to believe, conditional on our background knowledge and vivid hand perceptions, that it is antecedently very likely that God is not deceiving us (provided we lack evidence to the contrary). Since our perceptual limitations give us no reason to believe either that God is or is not deceiving us, we do lack evidence to the contrary. Though our inaccurate perception of value brings us to the brink of skepticism, our vivid hand perceptions pull us back!

M. J. Almeida first diagnoses a problem he sees with standard evidential arguments and then offers an improved argument. Let an *outweighing good* ("o-good") be a good the value of which outweighs the disvalue of the collection of evils it entails. Let a *God-purposed good* ("g-good") be an outweighing good that entails theism. Almeida's objection is that standard evidential arguments focus on g-goods when they should be focused on o-goods that do not entail theism. What we want to know, thinks Almeida, is the likelihood that *we know of* some o-good for an evil E, given that *there is* an o-good for E (119). What is less interesting, he argues, is the likelihood that we know of some g-good (an o-good that entails theism) for E, given that there is a g-good for E. In reply, anyone who thinks that God is necessary if possible and thinks God possible will fail to see any difference between those questions because everything entails a necessary being. But perhaps the idea is either that evidential arguments are aimed at agnostics, or that, at least while considering evidential arguments, necessitarian theists are supposed to be agnostics, even about the possibility of theism.

Almeida's improved argument turns on the following thesis: the probability that no known o-good entails E, given that some o-good entails E, is *less than* the probability that no known g-good entails E, given that some g-good entails E. Or to paraphrase, it is more likely that we would find an o-good if it were there, than it is that we would find a g-good if it were there. For, though we may rightly doubt (given the epistemic distance between God and us) our ability to find g-goods were they to exist, we have no parallel reason to doubt our ability to find o-goods were they to exist. For, the existence of an o-good is not (we are supposing, for the sake of argument) contingent upon the designs of a vastly superior mind. One could reply here that atheistic consequentialists should be just as skeptical about finding o-goods as skeptical theists are about finding g-goods because the long-term total consequences of the consequentialist atheist's actions are no better known to him than the long-term total consequences of the skeptical theist's actions are known to her.

The last series of papers in this section begins with Paul Draper's wonderfully clear explanation of four evidential support relations in probabilistic terms. He then argues that Wykstranian skeptical theism succeeds at one thing but fails at another. It successfully shows that *failure to explain evil* does not confirm atheism. But skeptical theism fails to show that *evil* does not confirm atheism.



Timothy Perrine and Stephen Wykstra reply, not to Draper's contribution to this volume, but instead to an argument he gives elsewhere. They argue that a moderate form of skeptical theism may be able to resist one of Draper's Humean evidential arguments. Unlike Rowe-style evidential arguments, Humean evidential arguments do not claim that failure to detect certain goods lowers the epistemic probability that they exist. Instead, Draper's evidential argument states that naturalism is simpler than theism and more accurately predicts our total moral data, and partly for that reason, theism is improbable given that moral data (the probability of theism, given the moral data and Draper's background knowledge, is less than 0.5). In support of the prediction claim, Draper provides a thought experiment where two aliens with human-level cognitive abilities travel to Earth and make predictions. Both Natty (a naturalist) and Theo (a theist) acquire information about Earth's biosphere in the following order: the biological facts, pain and pleasure, flourishing and languishing, virtue and vice, triumph and tragedy, and finally, good and evil. Prior to each stage, each alien makes a prediction about the distribution of the qualities in the next stage. After each stage, each alien updates her background knowledge before making a predication about the next stage. Draper's view is that Natty's predictions will, overall, be more accurate than Theo's because Natty bases her predications on naturalism while Theo bases hers on theism. This thought experiment, then, supports the premise that "naturalism has a better predictive fit than theism regarding the data of good and evil" (145). In response, Perrine and Wykstra explain a moderate skeptical theism they think fits the total moral data at least as well as naturalism. They recommend that Theo, who may have been a naive theist (a theist who believes it likely that some theodicy is successful), should convert to skeptical theism, in order to improve her predictive powers. In reply, Draper argues that even if there is a version of skeptical theism that fits the moral data as well as naturalism, still, the probability of theism simpliciter, given the moral data and his background knowledge, remains less than 0.5. So adding skeptical theism is no help.

Lara Buchak clarifies this disagreement by considering two ways one might give up naive theism. Common to both is the assumption that when a person faces a group of incompatible theses that explain some data, she proportions her credences among the theses such that the sum of those credences is 1.

To illustrate, suppose I lost my keys. After scouring the house I face three explanations: a thief stole my keys (stolen), I failed to find them even though I searched their location (error), and my keys are in a location I have not yet searched (elsewhere). If these are the only candidate theses and I have a high view of my ability to find my keys when I search their location, then I proportion my credences like this:  $\text{Pr}(\text{stolen}/b) = 0.1$ ,  $\text{Pr}(\text{error}/b) = 0.3$ ,  $\text{Pr}(\text{elsewhere}/b) = 0.6$ .

Having distributed my credences among candidates in this way, upon gaining new evidence that rules out one of the candidates (sets its



probability to 0) there are two ways to distribute my credence from the debunked theory. I could distribute my credence across the other candidates such that the ratios between them change (“unevenly”), or I could distribute my credences such that the ratios do not change (“evenly”). Which way I in fact distribute depends upon what effect the debunking has upon the prior probabilities (priors) I assign to the other theses. If it equally affects their priors proportional to each other then I distribute evenly. If the debunking instead affects some of the priors non-proportionally, then I distribute unevenly.

Return to the keys. I discover that I have searched for the keys everywhere—there is no location they might occupy that I have not searched. So  $\Pr(\text{elsewhere}/b)$  changes from 0.6 to 0. This leaves 0.6 to be distributed between (stolen) and (error). The original ratio was 3(error):1(stolen). Discovering that I searched everywhere does not raise the prior of (stolen) for me at all, since failure to spot keys does not even mildly support failure to see key thieves roaming through my house. So I *unevenly* distribute it all to (error), resulting in  $\Pr(\text{error}/b) = 0.9$  and  $\Pr(\text{stolen}/b) = 0.1$ .

Return to the keys again but with a different discovery. This time I discover that I have searched for my keys everywhere *and* that there has been a local rash of key thefts by sneaky children. Again, the  $\Pr(\text{elsewhere}/b)$  changes from 0.6 to 0, leaving 0.6 to be distributed. What I have discovered this time, though, not only rules out one theory (elsewhere), it also raises the prior of (stolen). So this time, I might distribute the 0.6 *evenly* among the other theses, resulting in  $\Pr(\text{error}/b) = 0.75$  and  $\Pr(\text{stolen}/b) = 0.25$ , thereby retaining the 3(error):1(stolen) ratio. (Notice that the background knowledge (“b”) in the updated credences includes information not in the original background knowledge—namely, that (elsewhere) is false.)

With a handle on two ways we might update our credences (evenly vs. unevenly), let us now consider the effect of this distinction upon the Draper/Perrine and Wykstra disagreement. The question there is how, exactly, Theo should update his credences (evenly vs. unevenly) once he gives up naive theism. The idea suggested by Perrine and Wykstra is that Theo would, at some point in Draper’s process, switch to skeptical theism, and then restart the process making predictions based on skeptical theism instead.

The question that Theo is trying to answer is ‘Why is the total moral data the way it is?’ The three candidates are naive theism (NT)—God exists and the distribution is driven by humanly-identifiable goods, skeptical theism (ST)—God exists and the distribution is inscrutable because of epistemic distance, and naturalism (N)—there is no God and the distribution is inscrutable due to randomness and/or ignorance of initial conditions. Prior to seeing the moral data (D), Theo, suppose, assigns them the following probabilities because she is a theist,  $\Pr(\text{NT}/D\&b) = 0.7$ ,  $\Pr(\text{ST}/D\&b) = 0.2$ ,  $\Pr(\text{N}/D\&b) = 0.1$ . After getting the distribution data and failing to find the goods, Theo’s credence in naive theism drops to zero. The question is how she should update her credences in the remaining two theses. Should

they go evenly to  $\Pr(ST/D \& b) = .66$  and  $\Pr(N/D \& b) = .33$  or instead unevenly towards skeptical theism ( $\Pr(ST/D \& b) = 0.9$  and  $\Pr(N/D \& b) = 0.1$ ), or rather perhaps unevenly towards naturalism ( $\Pr(ST/D \& b) = 0.2$  and  $\Pr(N/D \& b) = 0.8$ )? The answer depends on whether Theo takes naturalism and theism to be empirically (dis)confirmable theses. If Theo thinks the empirical facts have no bearing on their prior probability, then she will update unevenly towards ST, because she begins as a theist and the distribution of pleasure and pain (being an empirical fact) have no impact on her prior for naturalism. But even if she thinks they are empirically (dis)confirmable and she evenly distributes (since skeptical theism and naturalism make about the same predictions), she still takes skeptical theism to be twice as likely as naturalism (.66 vs. .33), *due to her priors*. Even if she takes empirical facts to (dis)confirm these theses, since skeptical theism and naturalism make approximately the same predictions, she has no reason to update unevenly towards naturalism. But of course, just the reverse will be the case for Natty, the naturalist alien. She will take naturalism to be at least twice as likely as skeptical theism (even after her credence for naive theism drops to zero). She will face very similar (just with “reversed” priors) circumstances and her answers will be a mirror image of Theo’s. The upshot of Buchak’s paper for this disagreement, it seems to me, is that though there are different ways to update belief in the face of new evidence, in this case the differences are swamped by the priors and the fact that the two competing theses, even if empirically (dis)confirmable, make the same empirical predictions. In the probabilistic terms Draper uses to model his Humean argument, even assuming that empirical facts affect prior probabilities, whether the  $\Pr(D/N \& b)$  is greater than, less than, or equal to  $\Pr(D/ST \& b)$  is still determined by an individual’s priors for skeptical theism and naturalism.